
United States Security Cooperation in the Middle East Cross-Cultural Considerations and Customer Relations

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Key points in establishing and nurturing an effective “relationship” with Middle Eastern military representatives

All people are the same; it is only their habits that are different.
Confucius

In a practical sense, cultural adjustment to different habits suggests adjustment not to culture but to behavior. Culture is an abstraction that can be appreciated intellectually, but behavior is the key manifestation of culture that we encounter, experience, and deal with.¹ In this ongoing series of articles on cross-cultural communications in the Middle East context,² we will offer succinct guidance to become more effective in nurturing a professional relationship with Middle Eastern representatives.

The United States Department of Defense professionals who engage with our Middle Eastern partners are generally well prepared to deal with the obvious cultural differences. U.S. service members and particularly those involved in implementing security cooperation activities in the Middle East receive effective “cultural awareness” training, but the scope and depth is primarily to avoid embarrassing social offenses. U.S. security cooperation implementers are sensitized to Islamic practices and traditional Middle East norms. The aim is to demonstrate our respect for fundamental values in the region so that we can establish credible relationships that support our mutual interests. American personnel in the region generally know about: inappropriate use of the left hand, are sensitive to avoid compromising situations among mixed genders, adjust well to the enhanced restrictions during Ramadan, and understand what is going on when hearing the calls to prayer five times per day, etc.

In working to improve our knowledge, skills and abilities to better understand the various nuanced meanings in Middle Eastern cultural contexts, we first need to become more attuned to what is meant, rather than just what is said. Progress towards improved cross-cultural communications, requires factoring in new considerations while interpreting meaning in interpersonal engagements. We also need to realize that it takes ongoing practice and experience to improve cross-cultural communication skills.

The following bullet statements are offered for guidance in defining meaning and establishing expectations of behavior of Middle Eastern representatives:

- Recognize that, what for Americans seems to be extraordinary hospitality and politeness from host nation (HN) counterparts – are standard obligations, not indicators of “hitting it off”.
- Present a calm, patient, even tempered persona. Avoid expressing classic type A traits. Expect to eventually reach your objectives by effective “influence” upon your Middle Eastern counterpart. Influence by demonstration on your part is more effective than lectures. Influence will be accomplished by first gaining respect and trust. This takes

1. Storti, Craig, *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, (Yarmouth, Main: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1989), p. 14.

2. Kron, Hank, “Cross Cultural Considerations for U.S. Security Cooperation in the Middle East”, *The DISAM Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 74-87.

time and effort – meaning investing in frequent encounters – even if there is no particular outcome expected other than a pleasant time with a colleague/friend.

- Initial relationships will be characterized by discussions involving the pertinent work issues at hand preceded, interspersed, and concluded with considerable chats on personal, non-work related subjects – including politics and religion. Family (children), sports, travel, and cuisine are safe subjects to use as vehicles to get to know one another.
- Eventually, politics and religion will be addressed however obliquely or subtly, and one must be sensitive to those opportunities. Revealing personal attributes about oneself is key to advancing the relationship towards increased effectiveness on the job. Belief in God, no matter what faith or denomination is considered a positive aspect of one's upbringing and moral character. No need to be shy about expressing one's religiosity provided it is a part of the Abrahamic faiths (Judeo-Christian). Avoid theological debates aimed at countering, disputing, or arguing. Allow the HN counterpart to "present" Islam, and politely listen with interest. There are no expectation to convert to Islam.
- Inevitable chats on contemporary politics and regional history will afford opportunities to appear as a professional service member carrying out assigned duties. Be sympathetic to morally based grievances. Avoid argumentative discussions. One can "win" the debate but alienate your Middle Eastern counterpart and thereby sour the relationship or diminish what could be accomplished together.
- Think of the Middle East as the western edge of Asian civilization. Subtlety, indirectness, politeness to avoid direct confrontation, using intermediaries as conflict resolvers, values towards seniority, group imperatives over the individual, are all in play. Gain awareness of what is not said, which can indicate important communication. A basic example is previous levels of hospitality, or responsiveness to favors, now reduced, may indicate a problem - even though the actual hospitality is still excessive by American standards.
- Indicators of a deepening inter-personal relationship are: touching a Middle Eastern counterpart hand or arm holding, off hours rendezvous [both work related and/or social]. At this stage, expect Middle Eastern counterpart requests for favors, typically involving in some kind of shortcutting the system. The good news is you too are expected to call in favors. Use your cards judiciously.
- Be cautious to what you pledge to do. It looks better to subtly indicate you will work on it, and then deliver rather than state you will do it and fall short.
- Conversation is a vehicle to establish, nurture and enjoy the relationship. So, prolonging positive topics of discussion, exaggerating positive aspects, portraying the future as vaguely positive, is a communication style that is not expected to be held to one's word after the encounter as it would be by honorable men in the "West". One has to learn to discern what is said for the pleasure of the moment among friends, versus what is really meant to be acted upon afterwards. Many Westerners misunderstand this type of communication as "lying", if not misleading. If you gain insights into why conversation is the way it is in the Middle East, then you are on the way towards enhanced effectiveness and reduced frustration.

Cultural adjustment and gaining enhanced cross-cultural communication skills is a more elusive effort than we might initially consider. Effective cross-cultural engagement requires a focused and raised comprehension of foreign and nuanced communications, coupled with practical experience
